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Eastern Europe Is Not the Centre or the Periphery

Kimberly E. Zarecor

Iowa State University, zarecor@iastate.edu

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Eastern Europe Is Not the Centre or the Periphery

Abstract

As Larry Wolfe reminds us, the edge of Europe is somewhere in the middle of Russia and 'Eastern Europe' is an invention of eighteenth-century intellectuals. Locating the division between civilisation and backwardness in Prussia, and along the schism of Germanic and Slavic languages, these intellectuals set up a framework for interpreting Europe that remains with us today. Until World War II, this division was about perceptions of an urban, industrialised West and a rural, agricultural East. There was no definitive mark where the West ended and the East began. Consensus came only after 1945 as the definitive categorisation of the East became countries aligned with the Soviet Union or a ruling Communist Party. The clarity of this Cold War terminology has now faded. Architectural historians succeeded in bringing attention to Eastern Europe in the 1990s. First as a missing history of the avant-garde, and then back into nineteenth-century national identity formation and forward to postwar Stalinism and industrialisation. This aligned with a disciplinary move toward postwar research and, for a time, Communist countries had the appeal of being the unknown. We are now in the midst of another shift, the re-marginalisation of Eastern Europe on the same terms as in the eighteenth century. As the Global South has become the focus of intense scholarly attention, Europe and North America have become the normative centre, but only some of this territory matters. The perception that Eastern Europe is still backward, trying to catch up to the West after decades of communism, means that it cannot be fully representative of the European experience. It is neither the centre, nor the celebrated other, so it is marginal and overlooked. The methodological question is where to go from here and how to re-situate the region and its historiographic concerns within the discipline.

Keywords

Eastern Europe, marginalisation, Czechoslovakia, Global South

Disciplines

Architecture | European History | European Languages and Societies | Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies | Theory and Criticism

Comments

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a complexification of this understanding and of its geopolitical implications, giving more room for a comparative approach that questioned the polarized frame of the Cold War by expanding its territory and thus introducing the Third World in an analysis founded on transfers and circulation.

Paradoxically, this (disputable) integration led to a change in the very concept of Eastern Europe. Its progressive dilution within the more or less dominant discourse could be understood as an indicator of the relative success of the historiographical assimilation. If such a withdrawal is justifiable – the fear of the limitation inherent to all area studies, the belief in a ‘global’ history, etc. – it still shows a certain methodological turn.

The roundtable aims to debate this withdrawal and proposes an analysis of its causes and consequences. Is it still useful to refer to a geo-historical concept when writing an architectural history that aspires more and more to be transversal and inclusive? And if so, how is it possible to make such a concept recover both its historical dimension and the acuteness of its particularities? By taking Eastern Europe as a (valid) pretext, the roundtable questions the current mechanics of architectural historiography.

Eastern Europe Is Not the Centre or the Periphery

Kimberly Zarecor,
Iowa State University

Abstract

As Larry Wolfe reminds us, the edge of Europe is somewhere in the middle of Russia and ‘Eastern Europe’ is an invention of eighteenth-century intellectuals. Locating the division between civilisation and backwardness in Prussia, and along the schism of Germanic and Slavic languages, these intellectuals set up a framework for interpreting Europe that remains with us today. Until World War II, this division was about perceptions of an urban, industrialised West and a rural, agricultural East. There was no definitive mark where the West ended and the East began. Consensus came only after 1945 as the definitive categorisation of the East became countries aligned with the Soviet Union or a ruling Communist Party. The clarity of this Cold War terminology has now faded. Architectural historians succeeded in bringing attention to Eastern Europe in the 1990s. First as a missing history of the avant-garde, and then back into nineteenth-century national identity formation and forward to postwar Stalinism and industrialisation. This aligned with a disciplinary move toward postwar research and, for a time, Communist countries had the appeal of being the unknown. We are now in the midst of another shift, the re-marginalisation of Eastern Europe on the same terms as in the eighteenth century. As the Global South has become the focus of intense scholarly attention, Europe and North America have become the normative centre, but only some of this territory matters. The perception that Eastern Europe is still backward, trying to catch up to the West after decades of communism, means that it cannot be fully representative of the European experience. It is neither the centre, nor the celebrated other, so it is marginal and overlooked. The methodological question is where to go from here and how to re-situate the region and its historiographic concerns within the discipline.

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In the 1990s, Larry Wolff’s formulation of the ‘invention of “Eastern Europe”’ provided legitimacy for scholars working to make the histories of this region visible within global historiography. If Eastern Europe was an invention of enlightenment intellectuals, then this East/West construction could be challenged. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the regional communist

parties that had defined the 'East' since the 1940s gave urgency to this agenda. For many intellectuals in the region, belonging once again to the centre and therefore to the West, was critical. They wanted to distance themselves from perceptions of Eastern European backwardness. The active discourse around the term Central Europe in the 1990s made this regional dialog visible to outsiders and the compromise of 'East Central Europe,' that is still popular in Czech and Polish contexts, is a reminder that there are still high stakes for many people in the debate about terminology.

My interest in participating in this panel was prompted by my own sense in the last ten years or so that we are in the midst of a historiographic shift, what amounts to the re-marginalisation of Eastern Europe on the same terms as in the eighteenth century. Architectural historians succeeded in bringing some attention to Eastern Europe in the 1990s, a focus that remained consistent well into the 2000s before starting to recede again. Attention went first to reconstructing the missing history of the region's avant-gardes, then back into the nineteenth century to illuminate the formation of national identities, and finally forward to postwar Stalinism, industrialisation, and prefabrication – the topic of my dissertation, completed in 2008. The Cold War focus aligned with a disciplinary move toward the postwar period and nationalism as a theme connected to interdisciplinary conversations about post-colonial and post-imperial spaces. For a time, the former Communist countries had the appeal of being the unknown, places inaccessible to outsiders for decades, where minor languages were spoken, and with grey and crumbling formerly grand cities. This is no longer the experience of the region and scholarly focus has shifted.

The new frontier is the Global South. Europe and North America are now the normative centres, foils for arguments about the importance of transnational flows of expertise and knowledge paradigms through networks of alternate centres and peripheries. But, only some of Europe matters in these new discourses. Eastern Europe has once again become a shorthand for being behind or backward. Architecture and urbanism in the region is seen as still trying to catch up to the West after decades of Communism, and therefore not fully representative of the European experience. Eastern Europe was also the imperial hinterland, whereas Western European countries were the colonisers and their links to the Global South survive through linguistic and material culture connections. For example, French, Portuguese, Italian, or Spanish language knowledge provides access for scholars to primary sources in many parts of the Global South.

Neither the centre, nor the celebrated other, Eastern Europe has moved again to the margins. One strategy to overcome this has been to posit the relevance of the Second World through its collaborations with the networks of the Third World. In this context, the Cold War divisions of East and West can be redrawn as a global technocratic discourse in which modernisation as a practice can complicate the traditional binaries. The work of Lukasz Stanek

and Elidor Mëhilli shows the promise and appeal of such approaches. Yet the Second World framework itself is situated in the twentieth century, so it cannot encompass geographic and local cultural distinctions that are evident on a longer historical timeline, before and after Communism.

In my most recent writing, I argue for the utility of the category of Eastern Europe on its own terms through contemporary culture and politics. Eastern European countries have responded differently than those in Western Europe to the on-going migrant crisis, the Eurozone financial problems, and in the face of Russia's and its own politicians' increasingly authoritarian stances. The reasons for this reach back into the nineteenth century and sometimes earlier and are tied closely to the region's self-perception as a periphery and one repeatedly subjugated by others, including the Soviets. International news is full of coverage of growing authoritarian tendencies of the region's rightwing leaders including in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. The Czech Republic has not seen a decline in civil liberties, but its political class is increasingly drawn from a wealthy rightwing elite. The region may be losing some of its historiographic significance, but at the same time, the question of legacies is increasingly relevant as Western Europeans observe a region within Europe that does not always adhere to its perceptions of Europeanness. If architectural history continues its re-marginalisation of Eastern Europe, we lose the opportunity to use our disciplinary tools to explore the differences that have and are still emerging between Europe's East and West.

A city like Prague has always been a misfit in this territorial geography. The former seat of the Holy Roman Empire, due north of Vienna with many bi-lingual residents, and highly industrialised by the twentieth century, Prague had a Czech-speaking elite with nineteenth-century connections to the Pan-Slavic movement, but German was the language of power and international commerce into the twentieth century. After 1918, the city's Czechs, Germans, Jews, and other ethnic and linguistic minorities aligned themselves culturally more with Paris and Berlin than any city to the east and easily moved between languages and international cultural references. After 1948, Prague moved completely into the East, behind the Iron Curtain, but since the mid-1990s its patterns have been harder to delineate and categorise in these binary terms.

The fuzziness reinforces the necessity of the term, Eastern Europe. Prague's location on this threshold highlights the importance of the category, not as an arbiter of civilisation and backwardness (terms largely discredited in the specialist literature), but instead as a marker of historical continuities and discontinuities, of political and cultural experiences, and post-imperial nation building. Sociologist Tomasz Zarycki's book, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe* (2014), explores the origins and current state of the question of the 'East' in the region. He argues that the focus should not be in overcoming the region's orientalisation

(borrowing from Edward Said), which he argues is insurmountable, but rather in understanding ‘the mechanisms which stand behind the discursive stigmatisation of [this] part of Europe,’ both external and internal.¹¹ In these terms, my interest in the Czechoslovak case resides in its own specificities, not in claiming its Western or Eastern *bona fides*, but as a place marked by and defined by particular political ideologies, geopolitical power networks, forms of urbanity, and professional practices. Decoupled from any measurable geographic location in the East, Czechoslovakia, and now the Czech Republic and Slovakia, exist in this discursive space, which itself exists to illuminate the subtleties of the European narrative and also the global questions of networks and centres/peripheries in the postwar era.

Notes

- 1 Tomasz Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2014), 1.

Local? Global?: The Power to Define Conceptual Categories

Veronica E. Aplenc,
University of Philadelphia

Abstract

As noted, since the 1990s scholars have sought to reconceptualize Eastern Europe, foregrounding its particular characteristics along new lines while simultaneously pushing it aside as a category of analysis in favor of greater paradigms. Importantly, this work countered the peripheral status historically assigned to Eastern Europe along geographic, disciplinary, and architectural production lines. However, the region’s new position as both a generative, yet disappearing, analytical category raises important theoretical questions.

We must ask whether the focus on supra-local categories, such as national, transnational, and global, reifies Eastern Europe’s historically peripheral status along existing lines by denying influence from regional scholarship on these very categories. Some would argue that Eastern Europe finds itself in the challenging position of not being “Other” enough to generate its own conceptual categories. For example, it stands in contrast to South Asia and subaltern studies. However, research findings from the region complicate this interpretation.

Eastern European cities reveal a complex understanding of the so-called national, global, and transnational within their specific contexts. Tarik Amar has demonstrated for 1950s Lviv that the application of Soviet practices allowed the city to develop along national lines. My research on Slovenia finds that Slovene planners embraced a local, highly bounded, focus for 1970s Ljubljana’s development. In the first case, “national” is complicated by the socialist; in the second, it is a socialist configuration that is highly bounded, versus a “national” one. Both examples ask that we interrogate these categories from a local – or, to borrow an anthropological term, *emic* – perspective as they do not precisely mirror Cold War-era paradigms. This, in turn, asks researchers to reassess the position of Eastern Europe in a now unclear world order. Importantly, it also calls them to interrogate the nature of their own research and political positionality, as well as that of Eastern European colleagues.